Reading #8

River Dynasties in China

Section I. River Valleys

The last of the great early civilizations arose in China and continues to this day. China’s geography caused it to develop apart from other cultures.

A great ocean, huge deserts, and high mountains isolate China from other areas. The mountains did not protect China totally, however. People living to the north and west invaded the land many times during Chinese history.

There are two rich rivers within China — the Huang He and the Yangtze. Almost all the good farmland in China lies between these rivers, located in Eastern China. The Huang He (or Yellow) River, which is 3,000 miles long, deposited huge amounts of silt when it overflowed. This silt is fertile soil called loess and is colored yellow giving the River its nickname. The Chinese people made use of the flood waters of these rivers to grow crops. The Yangtze is the third longest river in the world measuring almost 4,000 miles long. At its shallowest the river is about 25 feet deep but during the flooding it gets about 160 feet deep.

All the rivers in China were called the Great Sorrow because they would flood every year and could destroy any towns built along them.

Section II: Civilization Emerges in Shang Times

A few thousand years ago, people began to farm along China’s rivers and around 2000 BCE, the first governments were created to organize the growing farming villages. These first governments were dynasties, governments where the rulers came from a single family. Around 1500 BCE, the Shang family began to rule. This dynasty left the first written records in China.

Chinese people built their buildings of wood, not mud-dried brick as the other early cultures did, although they did build huge walls made of earth that surrounded these buildings to protect them. The walls were needed because it was a time of constant war.

The king and the nobles who helped him fight these wars were at the top of Shang society. At the bottom was the mass of peasants who lived in simple huts outside the city walls. They worked hard on the farms, using wooden tools because the Shang believed that bronze was too good to be used for farming.

Section III: Technology, Record Keeping and Trade

The Ancient Chinese made progress in many areas. For example, astronomers studied the movement of the planets and recorded eclipses of the sun. They developed and accurate calendar with 365 ¼ days. They developed an effective irrigation system as the other river valley civilizations had done. By 1000 B.C., the Chinese had even discovered how to make silk thread from cocoons of silk worms. Soon, the Chinese were cultivating both silkworms and the mulberry trees on which they fed. Women then wove silk threads into a smooth cloth that was colored with brilliant dyes. Only royalty and nobles could afford such luxurious silk robes. Silk became China’s most valuable export. The trade route that eventually linked China and the Middle East became known as the Silk Road. To protect this profitable trade, the Chinese kept the process of silk making a secret.
The Chinese also developed their own system of writing. Chinese scholars studied the Chinese written language and turned calligraphy, or fine handwriting, into an elegant art form. The Chinese are also credited with making the first books that were made from wood or bamboo.

Finally, The Chinese also learned the process of ironworking. As iron axes and ox-drawn plows replaced stone, wood, and bronze tools, farmers began to grow new crops. This caused Commerce (trade) to expand in China. The Chinese began to use money for the first time. Chinese copper coins had holes in the center so they could be strung on cords. This type of cash economy made trade easier.

Section IV. Zhou and the Chinese Government

About 1027 BCE, a new family, the Zhou (JOE) took control of China. They adopted Shang culture and started an idea of royalty that was new to China. Good rulers, they said, got authority to rule from heaven, this was known as the Mandate of Heaven. If rulers became weak or corrupt, the Chinese believed that Heaven could withdraw its support for that ruler. Floods, famine, or other catastrophes were signs that a dynasty had lost favor of Heaven.

The Zhou claimed the Shang rulers were not just and had lost the support of the gods and that is why they had to be replaced. From then on, the Chinese believed in divine rule. Until the early 1900s, the Chinese had one dynasty after another. This pattern of rise, fall, and replacement of dynasties is known as the dynastic cycle.

The Zhou gave members of the royal family and other nobles the rights to large areas of land. They established feudalism. Feudalism is a system of power based on land ownership & loyalty.

Like the Shang, eventually the Zhou rulers lost power too, and this led to a civil war where nobles fought each other for control of China in a period called the "time of the warring states". It lasted many hundred years.